A LITERARY STUDY OF HENRI BREMOND

BY
SISTER DOROTHY MARIE PESCHON, R.S.M.
Ph.B., Saint Xavier College, 1919
A.M., University of Illinois, 1933

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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A LITERARY STUDY OF HENRI BREMOND

The object of this dissertation is to determine by a study of the works of Henri Bremond his position in contemporary French letters as a literary historian, theorist, and critic.

Henri Bremond is perhaps the only eminent personality in French criticism whose youth escaped Paris—Paris, the intellectual, literary, and worldly center, but not the religious or spiritual center of France. This undoubtedly accounts for Bremond's tastes. He did not come to the capital until he was thirty-five years of age, until his literary formation was well completed. Far from being deleterious to his preparation as a critic, this fact was advantageous; it enabled other and more varied influences to stamp their imprint on his literary consciousness. The first of these was the mystical and poetical influence exerted by the cultural and literary traditions of his native city, Aix-en-Provence. Here on July 31, 1865 was born Marie-Joseph-François-Régis-Ignace-Henri Bremond of ancestors as varied and contradictory in their tendencies as Henri later proved to be in his mental and spiritual make-up. His education was entrusted to the Jesuits, who laid solid foundations for both literary and scientific studies. At the age of sixteen he came under the influence of Gustave Mouravit to whom he is indebted for his taste for curious research. His religious vocation manifested itself when he was seventeen. He left Aix in 1882 for the Jesuit novitiate in Sidmouth, Devonshire. During his sojourn in England, he became intensely interested in English literature, soon mastering the works of George Eliot, Dickens, and Thackeray, and later of Shakespeare, Tennyson, Keats, Shelley, and Browning. His knowledge and appreciation of nineteenth century English literature became "unexcelled, perhaps unequaled by any other French writer of his generation." This acquaintance with a foreign literature playing a dominant role during decisive years forms the second potent factor of his literary formation. However, it was the Oxford movement and the Tractarians that influenced him

spiritually. He was transformed by his admiration for Newman and for English poetry. These two currents—religion and poetry—are the prime passions of his entire life: two currents that finally fuse in Bremond's mystical theory of poetry.

Before and after his theological studies at Mold in Wales, Bremond was professor of belles lettres in Jesuit colleges in France, at Dôle, Mongré, Moulins, and Saint-Etienne. One of his earliest books, *Le Prêtre et la formation littéraire des enfants,* shows his sincere concern with educational problems; another, *L'Enfant et la vie,* reveals his deep psychological insight into child-life. After his ordination in 1892, he began contributing scattered articles to such periodicals as *La Quinzaine, L'Univers,* and *Etudes* under the pseudonyms of Malvoisin, or Henri de Montmajour. Beginning with 1895, his articles under his own name appeared regularly in *Etudes.* His first essays, concerned principally with crises in conversion, have since been collected and published in book form: *Ames religieuses,* and two volumes of *L'Inquiétude religieuse.* In 1899 he was called to Paris to assume the literary editorship of *Etudes,* a post which he held until he severed connections with the Jesuits in 1904.

In 1907 after the publication of a four volume study of Newman, he became a regular contributor to *Le Correspondant.* But his interests were too varied and his personality too versatile to be limited to only one type of periodical; consequently he published articles in no less than twenty-four reviews, among them a German and an English publication. He exercised the curiosity of his philosophical and lyrical intelligence from Newman to Blondel and from Racine to Valéry. The titles cover almost every phase of literary activity from well-documented historical disquisitions and profound philosophical expositions to light linguistic discussions. To his pen are credited some forty volumes, several of which have been crowned by the French Academy. In 1923 he was elected to that august body to fill the chair vacated by the death of Monseigneur Duchesne. The death of Henri Bremond on August 17, 1933 in Arthez-d'Asson in the Basses Pyrénées,

caused the greatest stir in literary circles since the death of Anatole France.

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Two elements, religion and poetry, were preponderant in Bremond's literary formation; throughout his voluminous writings these two elements predominated, now individual and clearly defined, now fused and barely distinguishable. They became so united in his own mind that he invariably found a religious aspect in works of pure literature and gave a literary value to simple religious and devotional works. A chronological study of his works reveals the alternation of these two currents, followed by a complete fusion. His earliest works treated the Oxford movement; these were followed by a series of articles on both English and French profane literature. Then he reverted to a study of French spiritual writers. He produced innumerable works on Pascal, notable works on both Bossuet and Fénelon, and eleven volumes on a study of French religious thought: *L'Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France.*

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Bremond first attained renown as a literary psychologist. In his case psychology did not mean a moral preoccupation; but rather a curiosity, a sympathy for everything human. He appreciated and loved human drama for itself, particularly human crises, conflicts within the soul. Bremond indulged this psychological bent by devoting some ten years to a careful study of seventeenth century French literature, a literature which is essentially psychological. Beginning with secular criticisms, such as *L'Apologie pour Fénelon* (1909), "La folle 'Sagesse' de Pierre Charron" (1913), and numerous essays on Pascal, he was prompted by his deep interest in religious subjects and his love for the obscure and unexpected to explore a wealth of forgotten literature. This was an excellent preparation for his great subject: an historical, psychological, and literary treatise on French religious thought.

It is a generally accepted fact that the seventeenth century is the heart of French literature; but it is not sufficiently

realized that the heart of the seventeenth century is its religious life. One is prone to slight the tremendous religious activity of the period. Bremond in his monumental *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* has brought to light a vast and profound literature on the same plane as that of the scholars of Port-Royal; he has not only complemented Sainte-Beuve's *Port-Royal* but he has also critically revised the history of the religious thought of the entire century. By evaluating the French school, that of Bérulle and Lallemant, and by pointing out its principal currents, human and divine, he made a permanent contribution to French literature, and reestablished the exact perspective of French Catholicism which Sainte-Beuve had falsified by assigning undue importance to Port-Royal. Bremond has often been called a second Sainte-Beuve. Both men were enlightened critics, artists of good taste, and revealers of souls. But Bremond surpasses Sainte-Beuve in his ability to sound the depths of the soul and to understand and appreciate the contemplative and mystical life. This superiority in psychological insight is undoubtedly due to his theological training.

The first volume of *L'Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* is entitled "Humanisme dévot." In it Bremond undertakes to trace this movement from its origin, through its zenith to its decline. He places the origin of the humanistic movement in the Middle Ages; he shows how it was primarily Christian and that it was fostered by the Church for three centuries before the Protestant reformation. The great humanists of the Renaissance, although enthusiastic about the rediscovered wisdom of antiquity, were nevertheless docile to the Church. They claimed to be engaged in Catholic philosophy even when making commentaries on Aristotle and Plato; for they believed that they completed this ancient wisdom by renewing it in Christ and in His Church. Such humanists were Marcilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Thomas More, and Erasmus. This Christian conception of humanism was approved and sanctioned by the Church and found its justification in the decrees of the Council of Trent on the essential goodness of human nature. The danger lay, according to

Bremond, in taking the ancients as masters, in confusing Christian and pagan ideals and in developing pagan literature and Christian thought side by side. This is what happened in the late seventeenth century with the result that humanism was severed from its Christian roots.

Devout humanism is a subdivision of Christian humanism. The latter is more speculative than practical, more aristocratic than popular; it seeks first the true and the beautiful, addressing itself to the educated rather than to the populace; while devout humanism is a doctrine of personal sanctity, entirely directed to the practical needs of men. Bremond explains that the charter of this new phase of humanism is *Le Traité de l'amour de Dieu* by François de Sales, and claims that it was due to this author's influence, both literary and religious, that the Cartesian century remained profoundly Catholic. Before François de Sales vulgarized it, humanism seemed to be reserved, if not for scholars, at least for the well-born who had leisure, culture, and a taste for ancient literature. But by means of the *Introduction à la vie dévote* and the *Traité de l'amour de Dieu,* elevated Christian thought was brought within the reach of everyone. These works rapidly became popularized through the writing of two interpreters, Etienne Binet and Jean-Pierre Camus. Bremond has brought to light the tremendous literary productivity of devout humanism, in the fields of poetry, biography, and the novel, as well as in the more scholarly fields. He has saved from oblivion a group of writers, whose works exerted a remarkable influence on the religious life of France; to mention but a few: Père Joseph, the secret adviser of Richelieu; Jean-Jacques Olier, the founder of the Sulpicians; Claude Bérulle, the founder of the Oratorians; Père Lallemant, the leader of the French school of religious thought; Etienne Binet, encyclopedist and humorist; Ives de Paris, lawyer and magician; Charles de Condren, Louis Richeome, and others. He showed the important role that salons played in all the great religious movements of the seventeenth century, that of Mme Acarie being second to none in brilliance, intensity, and influence.

Having indicated by a sufficient number of clear examples

that devout humanism represents what is most characteristic and most excellent in religious works during the reigns of Henry IV and Louis XIII, Bremond, in order to give a fair picture, pointed out its undeniable flaws: its banalities, its tendency to certain reprehensible excesses. In spite of its flaws, devout humanism, by its doctrine of disinterested love and by its cult of solitude leads souls to the threshold of mysticism. At this time there was a penchant for retirement and retreat among the beauties of nature. Bremond cites instances which prove how much it was loved by his devout humanists; more truly loved and better understood than writers of literary history seem to believe. Nature in its varied aspects—mountains, woodlands, vast solitudes—did not frighten the Muse of this epoch; there is even an ode to La Grande Chartreuse and its sublime scenery. One remarkable distinction, according to Bremond, differentiates these men in spirit, imagination, and heart from the later romanticists. They take a supernatural view of natural beauty; their poetic effusions border on prayer; their solitude is but sweet communion with the Divine. They retain the dazzling enthusiasm of the new learning but moderate and exalt it by a lofty and invincibly joyous faith. For them two worlds exist—nature and grace. The very "raison d'être" of devout humanism is to unite these two worlds in a devout synthesis. Although devout humanism is not a school of mysticism, its aim being nothing more than to apply the best traditions of the Renaissance either to personal sanctification or to the direction of the faithful yet the studies and intellectual pursuits of humanism tend toward mysticism in that they seek direct union with an object beyond the frontiers of the tangible.

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Classicism as a literary movement concerns Bremond but slightly. He is less interested in commenting on the traditional exponents of seventeenth century classicism than in rehabilitating and reevaluating a group of lesser lights whose works, because they were primarily religious, fell into oblivion during the "age of enlightenment." By his study and research Bre-

mond shows that there existed in seventeenth century France a Christian classicism independent of the pagan-tinged classicism of Malherbe, Boileau, La Fontaine, Molière, and La Bruyère. His greatest grievance against classicism is that it tended to widen the breach between religion and literature and to prepare for the pure rationalism of the eighteenth century. A rational aesthetic, he claims, is contrary to the experience of poets and to the convictions and intuitions of philosophers, even though it may not always be at variance with the teaching and formulas of poetic theorists. What Bremond deplores in Boileau is that his rationalistic aesthetic, as revealed in his correspondence and works, was slighted. He points out that Boileau is not an original thinker; in his *Art poétique* he merely repeats what others were saying, among them Patru, Rapin, and Bouhours. Bremond finds Boileau truly inspired in his best poetry, and possessed of ardor and interior fire. By his enthusiasm, color, and the flashing brilliance of his Alexandrine verses, Boileau, he believes, is more akin to Théophile, Saint-Amant, and Maynard, whom he assailed with undisguised hatred, than to Molière or Racine whom he admired and sought unsuccessfully to imitate. The very things he had attempted to destroy, preciosity and Gallic verve, he himself saved from oblivion. Thus he was a follower of the school he most abhorred, and, according to Bremond, he will always hold a respected place in manuals of literature, not as the legislator who formed Racine and Molière, but as a poet in his own right.

Of all the major writers of the French classical period, Bremond preferred Pascal, whose greatest claim to glory is that in his *Mystère de Jésus* he gave to the world a perfect model of devotion to Christ. Bremond criticizes Brunschvicg's edition of Pascal, objecting to the plan adopted by the editor, and suggesting a parallel arrangement of the *Pensées* and the *Exercises* of Saint Ignatius, between which he finds perfect conformity.

In his work on Fénelon, Bremond joins to a profound psychology an astonishing knowledge of every aspect of the intellectual and social life of the seventeenth century: theology, casuistry, mysticism, court intrigues, religious jeal-

ousies and controversies. His method is bold; he often disagrees with established opinion. Thus in defending Fénelon and in attacking Bossuet he staggered both the literary and religious world, for the Sorbonne and tradition had always favored Bossuet. Having been severely censured for his satirical treatment of Bossuet, he conciliated those offended by devoting three volumes to annotated texts of the great orator, in which he shows his keen appreciation of Bossuet's marvelous gifts. He believes that Bossuet's glory will never be dimmed; but he asks that Fénelon's glory be not offered as an expiatory sacrifice on Bossuet's altar.

Bremond sees in classicism the logical evolution of humanism. The exuberance of the humanist has become restrained, freedom has become fettered by discipline, but the human interest is still predominant although stress is laid upon technical perfection. Literature to a classicist is an intellectual undertaking; it is not emotional in its inspiration nor in its appeal. The classicist does not deny inspiration, but he is not concerned with the intuitional aspect of his literary output. It is this very aspect, however, which intrigues Bremond and furnishes the subject for his most profound literary criticism. He finds a connecting link between humanism and romanticism in the last of the Italian humanists of the Renaissance who definitely stated the problem of poetic inspiration. Hence Bremond says: "Fin de l'humanisme transition de l'étude exclusive des règles aux méditations métaphysiques sur le mystère même de la poésie; fin du classicisme, premiers pas de romantisme."

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During the romantic period, aesthetics concerned itself with the inspiration of the poet and not with poetic technicalities. *Pour le romantisme,* however, is not a vigorous justification of romantic aesthetics. It even completely ignores the chief representatives of the movement, such as Lamartine, Hugo, Musset, and Vigny. It is but a series of disconnected essays on five writers of three different centuries: Boileau, Lamennais, Walter Scott, Sainte-Beuve, and Barrès, essays

that subtly and persuasively present original arguments to prove that there is much good in romanticism. It must always be borne in mind that Bremond colors everything with his religious thought. In *Pour le romantisme* he connects romanticism with religion or more specifically with mysticism. He shows that at the basis of French romanticism there had been a profound and sincere religious movement. Though he does not deny that many romantics became irreligious through excessive individualism, he nevertheless points out religious souls who were nourished by romanticism and thrived on it. Bremond accomplished much for romanticism: he proved the absurdity of the statement that romanticism is evil, that it is the cause of all misfortunes, and demonstrated that it is a movement whose benefits are beyond question. In order to arrive at this proof he adopted an unusual method. He defined romanticism according to his own taste or rather he never actually defined it but merely implied his meaning. He separated it from literary history and from chronology and interpreted it with a breadth and liberty which are both remarkable and daring.

Bremond's defense of romanticism is an intelligent and restrained attempt to distinguish its different values, and thereby to restore to honor that much vilified movement. His doctrine of romanticism is a literary philosophy based upon religious interpretation. Religion he believes to be the product of intuition or sentiment as well as of the intellect, since faith admits many "raisons que la raison ne connaît point." It is concerned with the inner self, the "Anima." But this realization of the activity of the inner self or of intuition is, in fact, one of the chief characteristics of the romantic movement. Hence the association in Bremond's mind between religion and romanticism. He rejoices that in romanticism literature has at last fully realized its higher calling; it has been freed from the stylistic fetters of rationalism and has become the great religious adventure of the human soul; it has brought about the liberation of the "Anima." He insists that the "péché mignon" of classical aesthetics was to keep poetry and faith in water-tight compartments. What he loves and glorifies in

romanticism is the reunion of faith and poetry and the place literature has given to the "inquiétudes" and exaltations of "Anima." Claiming that a restless conscience, i.e., "Anima," was more or less confusedly apprehended and expressed, often in a bizarre fashion, by all romantics, he is, nevertheless, acutely conscious of the insufficiencies of French romanticism. However, by stressing the beneficent aspects of romanticism, Bremond defended in the face of hostile academic tradition certain conclusions of romantic criticism: that poetic intuition possesses a distinctive character, and that poetry contains a suprarational element that cannot be reduced to rational knowledge. Seeking to clarify this essential quality of poetry, he turned to mysticism and endeavored to illuminate the more obscure phenomenon of poetic inspiration or knowledge by applying to it the principles of the mystical experience.

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In *Poésie pure* Bremond stated three points: that the essence of poetry is inaccessible to pure intelligence, that poetry must be felt or experienced and not merely understood, and that as soon as one tries to rationalize poetry the poetic impression is weakened or destroyed. In *Prière et Poésie* and *Racine et Valéry* he formulated a theory of poetry which has the same origin as his theory of prayer. These works are but the logical evolution of his profound studies on prayer and mysticism, and in them the union of his mystical thought and literary culture blazes forth in all its effulgence. The subject of pure love which he treated with such mastery in volume XI of the *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* is but the seventeenth century form of a philosophical problem which has preoccupied French thought for the past thirty years, i.e., the problem of intuition in its relation to the intellect. Intuitionism has ever been the handmaid of mysticism as intellectualism is that of dogmatism. The opposition between "Animus" and "Anima" has always existed. With Bremond this conflict enters the fields of religion, philosophy, poetry, and criticism, and partially explains the importance of his literary criticism. *Prière et Poésie* is not only a book of roman-

tic aesthetics, but it assumes great importance in French criticism as an expression of the presence of religious sentiment. Bremond transcends the psychological and rational to reach the poetic and the mystical; yet this transcendence from aesthetics to metaphysics is entirely in keeping with his meditations and research. Contending that prayer and poetry are but two dialects of the same language, he points out analogies between the mystic and the poet: their experience, whether mystical or poetic, is extra-rational; in both this experience permits contact with ultimate reality, i.e., with God, direct contact in the case of the mystic, indirect in the case of the poet. The poet yields willingly to this communion with the divine, because his only object is not like the mystic's—to appropriate to himself the divine gift—but to find incantatory formulas by which the poetic current may be transmitted to others. The principal difference between the mystical and the poetical state is that the latter is communicable, whereas the former is not.

Carrying on this mystical line of thought, Bremond gives a somewhat startling interpretation of Aristotle 's catharsis. He believes that every real poem is capable of catharsis—catharsis being the passage from rational to poetic knowledge, or in the terms of Claudel's parable, the substitution of the deeper activities of "Anima" for those of the surface activities of "Animus." Catharsis does not act upon the emotional life, but on the soul, the center of all poetic and mystical activity. The poet himself first experiences the purifying effect of the catharsis, then through "un heureux choix de mots harmonieux," he causes his reader to experience it. If the catharsis is there the current is carried on. Its effect is not only purifying, but calming; by it all is transfigured. The purging the poet undergoes is similar to that of the mystic, and by means of this inner poetic catharsis, human dross is transformed into divine song.

This original analysis leads Bremond to his surprising conclusion that the only thing higher than poetry is prayer. Poetry is all that is most intimate, deep, and divine within us. Poetry is not prayer, but leads to it. The poetic experience does not induce prayer in the poet himself, but by a mysterious

influence it does so in the case of the reader, impelling him to desire new grace, opening wide his innermost being to allow the current to exercise itself even in his higher faculties, urging his reason to interpretation or his will to completion of the union with the Reality of realities.

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The works of Henri Bremond are original and creative in the highest degree both from the point of view of style and of content. These two qualities are given a magnificent unity by his sentiment of complete trust in the Divine. *Pour le romantisme* showed us souls more or less consciously aspiring to this goal; *L'Inquiétude religieuse,* souls earnestly seeking after it; *L'Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France,* souls who have already reached it; and *Prière et Poésie,* the elevation of the poet which ends in prayer. Thus all Bremond's works tend toward the goal of union with God. Not that Bremond was a mystic in any sense of the word, but he was fully conscious of this unsatisfied craving of the human heart to find itself and lose itself completely in God.

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As a critic Bremond has been ranked in the same category as Sainte-Beuve and Taine. As a writer he has been compared to Bossuet, Fénelon, Diderot, and even to Proust. As a polemist and controversialist he engaged in literary encounters with Paul Souday, Jacques Maritain, Henri Ghéon, and Ernest Seillière. He is said to be the first critic and literary historian who has been able to interest public opinion deeply in a general question since Brunetière and the celebrated "bankruptcy of science." However, his greatest contribution to French literature is not so much his mystical philosophy of poetry as his *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France,* which has been designated as the only twentieth century work which belongs to the climate of Sainte-Beuve and which maintains both the monumental tradition of *Port-Royal* and the unadulterated freshness of humanism enhanced by an incomparable erudition. Hence Henri Bremond deserves to be classed as a critic of the first rank.

VITA

Sister Dorothy Marie Peschon was born in Chicago, Illinois on March 20, 1897. The years 1902 and 1903 were spent in Europe, chiefly in France and England. Her elementary education, begun abroad, was continued in the public schools of Evanston, Illinois. She was graduated from Evanston Township High School in 1915 and matriculated the following year at Saint Xavier College, Chicago. Continuing her college work at Northwestern University, she returned to Saint Xavier College where she was granted a Ph.B. degree in 1919. She taught French and Latin at Milledgeville High School during the year 1919-1920. During the next three years she taught modern languages, French, Spanish, and German at Saint Xavier Academy, Chicago. She entered the novitiate of the Sisters of Mercy of the Chicago Province in September, 1923, at the same time matriculating in the graduate school of Loyola University. During the summer of 1931, she enrolled in the graduate school of the University of Illinois and was granted the degree of M.A. in February, 1933. The year 1935-1936 was spent in graduate study at the Institut Catholique and the Sorbonne in Paris, supplemented by courses at the Collège de France and the Alliance Française, and by extensive travel throughout France, Luxembourg, Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy. She was elected to membership in the Illinois chapters of Pi Delta Phi and of Phi Kappa Phi in 1939.